



There's the big woods and the swamp and the piney woods and them old dunes . . . there's rocky places and bottom land and high country and everywhere it can be perty wild. Most folks don't know it but you can stand right in the middle of the town some nights and you'll see a deer. Varmints don't come in usual to where folks is unlessen they is perty hungry, but the small fellers hops in ever once

and a while, little back yard gardens got tasty little things in 'em often enough.

Ever so often a man will take it into his head to go off and live close to the trees, out in the brush, where nights are dark and big and long and perty quiet. Tomson was one of such. He wasn't much fer adventure but he was one fer sittin' on his hind end. A man with tastes like that gets along better where nobody much can see him and land is cheap and a house can be thrown together out of whatever's layin' loose.

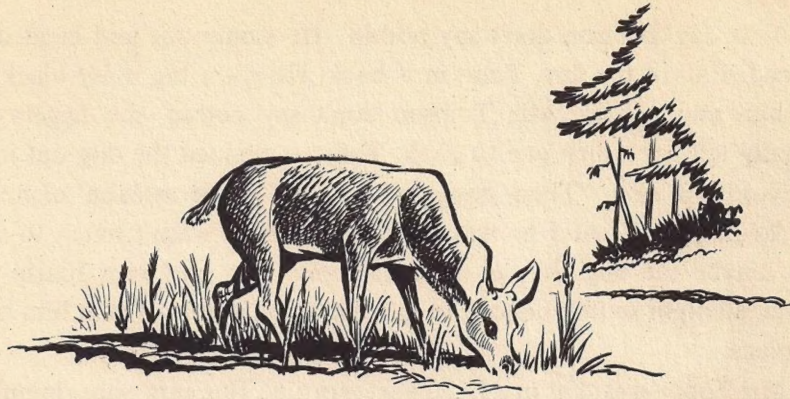
Hard times makes most folks alike and hard weather makes a lot of animal critturs alike. They get venturesome and nosey into places where it looks like they might get food. Ever body is on the prod. The folks scrapin, and the critturs stealin'. And if the critturs get varminty out of plain bein' hungered or plain bein' mean, folks keeps a eye on their young 'uns and on their stock, cause you never can tell and a cold nose on a child might not mean he's healthy. Might mean he's cold for good.

Such times came and Tomson hardly noticed it. His old woman was always complainin' anyway so he din't pay her no never mind. Things was hard enough. There was nothin' to eat, the old woman kept sayin', and old Tomson, he just nod his head and say, "Uh huh." Which ain't much of a counterbution. One day though it come up where there really for sure wasn't nothin' to eat and Tomson got real mad.



"Why don't you tell me these things?" he hollered from his bed of pain and hunger the mornin' when he knew there was for sure no food. He got up and got dressed. He was ready to do somethin' desp'rate . . . like walkin' into town and seein' his brother Pepper 'bout a small loan. He was sure of gettin' the money because Pepper was feeble minded and worked hard for a living, but the walkin' part sort of sobered old Tomson's thinkin' down a little.

Just then Tomson looked out the clean window, the one where rain got at it, and he saw a deer come nuzzlin' through the place where his old woman's garden would of been if Tomson had weeded the rascal. No dang



deer got any rights to go into a man's garden when times is hard, said old Tomson to hisself, so he got down his heavy gun and blasted a hole right through the deer in season or out didn't make no difference to Tomson.

Miz Tomson come and look into the room and her face fell a mite. "Land, pa," she said, "I figgered you committed the suicides."

"There's a deer out in you garden, woman," said Tomson. "You go out and tend the crittur whilst I gets me some rest. Us got food now." And Tomson went back and slept a few hours cause nobody knows how tired a man can get 'til he's been huntin' for grub. Miz Tomson got the deer skinned and whacked a leg off with a shovel which was tolerable sharp. Old Tomson woke up to the smell of fryin' venison.

They ate, the two on 'em, and then lay around the rest of day restin' up. Ever once and a while ol' Tomson allowed that somebody ought to get out and haul in the rest of the deer and Miz Tomson, she agreed with him. Perty soon it got dark and Tomson knew he'd have to get in the meat if anybody was goin' to, Miz said she had enough food for that day. You can guess, when he got out there some dang nang varmint had crump up and stolt the whole of the left overs which included most of the whole deer.

Tomson went back into the house perty sored off and would of hit the old woman a lick with the shovel if he could of knowed what old Miz did with it but he couldn't of seed her in the dark nohow so he went to bed maddern anybody. He slept bad too 'cause it come up rain and blowed like the fury through the window he'd shot out in the morning. All over his bed. He cuss ol' Miz 'cause he know she dry, sleepin' on the floor in some corner somewheres.

Next day Tomson don't say nothin'. He stomp out and head down the road. End of the day, Tomson is back. He got a big noisy black dog with him and a ham. Miz Tomson don't say nothin' she figgers he'll ventually tell her which one to cook. Tomson chained the dog out in the back yard and said, "Them dang critturs ain't go be astealin' of nothin' now, by nag! . . ." And he was right 'cause there wasn't much to steal. 'Cept maybe the dog. It was an awful noisy dog and kept roarin' and shoutin' all night so that nobody in his right mind would of stolt him in the first place.

Miz Tomson said as much the next mornin'. Her ears were ringin' and she was stiff from settin' up all night with the shovel not knowin' when the dog would break down the door. Tomson just grunted for a while and gnawed at the hambone. Finely he flung it out the door to the dog and told the old Woman. "If I han't of stolt the dog in the first place I wouldn't of been able to trade him for the ham in the second place and steal him back to portect the house in the third place and you wouldn't of et in the last place."

"Why and the whirl did you ever steal him back," asked old Miz. "I been portectin' the house right well with this here shovel."

"You ain't go be able to it much more, ma," said Old Tomson, "the varmints is gettin bolder and fiercer and more of 'em . . . listen."

Now that the dog was quiet down, you could hear off in the brush, the snarlin' and fightin', the yawpin' and spittin' and loud mouth cussin' of all sorts of varmints large and small. The dog stop chewin' his bone for a minute and listen too . . . then he give a big loud holler and swear like a good one at the noises. You could hear the noises slinkin' off . . . and the big black dog went back to crackin' his bone up good.



"See there, ma," said old Tomson . . . "that dog is powerful useful."

Well, they grubbed along perty good. . . . Old Tomson would get meat somehow and the dog would get his bones . . . and holler at the noises and the varmints would go off cussin' to theyselves. It was a perty good arrangement except the dog never knew when he'd did enough. He'd holler and talk and cuss all night . . . and all day . . . seemed like he never slept. For sure old Tomson didn't sleep much and he was a man that had talent in the direction of solid free hand sleepin'.

"That dog ought to be called FREESPEECH," swore Tomson, one morning when he'd had less sleep than usual. "He's always makin' so much noise." So they called him Freespeech after that, when they weren't callin' him somethin' else and tellin' him to shut to dang blang up.

Couple times Freespeech tangled with a varmint that come too close and old Tomson and his wife et what was left after the dog ate all he could. They were sorta proud of the big dog but land he sure did keep 'em from sleepin'.

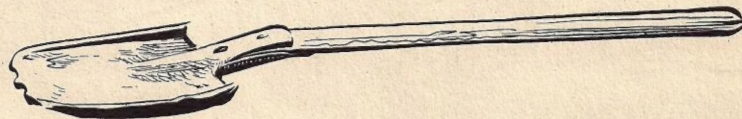
Came a time when the critturs and varmints seemed to of been scairt off complete. It was also a time when old Tomson had had enough of the dog's noise.

"Dang dog ain't worth a hoot now 'cept to make noise," said Tomson when he looked out the window . . . the broken one. He scratched hisself in a few vital spots and went along talkin', "And us ain't got NO meat today and I be dan booned if I know where we gone GET any."

Miz Tomson looked over at the shovel and said, "Tomson, d'you figger dog meat is worth eatin'?"

Tomson din't say nothin'. He stood there scratchin' and figgerin'. It was plain to him that ol' Freespeech wasn't workin' at nothin' now. He'd had so much to say that all the crittur rascals were scairt off good. All he was doin' now was keepin' the house awake and that didn't set so well with Tomson. He went over and picked up the shovel and went on outdoors.

That evenin' the Tomsons set outdoors on the bench in the cool



lickin' ther fingers and 'lowin' as how dog meat wasn't so bad after all. They'd chonked all the bones out where Freespeech used to be as a sort of remembrance. Perty soon Tomson leaned back against the house and fell off to sleep. It was so nice and quiet without none of Freespeech's hootin' and hollowin'.

Little time pass by and Tomson hear Miz give a sort of scream. He woke up and there was a big black slaverin' varmint eatin' up on his leg. He kicked out and hollered but the crittur kept right on chompin'. Tomson thrash a round and holler and cuss fer old Miz to come arunnin' with his gun or the shovel. But all he hear is Ol' Miz hollerin' back.

Then he see what is happenin'. A whole slew of varmints is stomped outen the woods and is eatin' up on the Tomsons. One of 'em is grab old Miz and heads for the brush. He started swallowin' the old Woman head first and the best she can do is wave goodbye to Tomson with her toes.

Tomson hisself is disappearin' fast though and he barely has time to take off his hat. At about the last minute he get kind of angered at old Freespeech . . . "Where in tunket is that dang blang dog when we needs him most?" he holler.

Then, with jest his eyes peepin' out, he sees the pile of bones they'd left behind and he remembers. And he feels a warm spot for the old dog. "Too bad," he say to hisself, "too bad old Freespeech ain't here now . . . we din't have much to leave him, but how he would of enjoyed those bones."

The varmints went into the house later but there wasn't nothin' in there but a shovel. Varmints can't use shovels no way, no how. So they left things in peace.

